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A CRITICISM OF TWO RECENT LISTS OF
IOWA BIRDS.¹

BY IRA N. GABRIELSON.

An interest in Iowa ornithology leads me to call attention to several questionable records concerning Iowa birds which have appeared in two recent articles in the Wilson Bulletin. As both of these lists deal with the same general locality in North Central Iowa, they are treated together.

In the first and more pretentious paper, by Carroll Lane Fenton, two additions to the Iowa State list, as compiled by Anderson,² and records of other rare species are found, based on what seems to be insufficient evidence. The more important of these will be discussed in order under the separate species involved.

It is of course unsafe to assert dogmatically that an organism endowed with such remarkable locomotive powers as a bird possesses cannot occur at a given place at almost any time. There is, however, a generally accepted principal among working ornithologists that such abnormal occurrences should only be considered authentic when the actual specimens are secured. This is especially true where the observer is unfamiliar with species or when the bird is of a species difficult to distinguish from nearly related forms. This point has been discussed so many times that it is unnecessary to elaborate it further. The following records in Mr. Fenton's paper seem open to question:

1. *Colymbus holboelli*.—Holboell's Grebe.

Anderson (op. cit., p. 148) says, "Appears to be very rare in Iowa," and he does not list a single Iowa specimen. In view of this lack of authentic records for the State, sight identifications are not acceptable. The May 26 record is particularly questionable

¹ Fenton, Carroll Lane. Preliminary List of the Birds of Floyd County, Iowa (Wilson Bulletin, Vol. XXVIII, p. 130-138, September, 1916).

Tuttle, F. May. May Bird Census (Wilson Bulletin, Vol. XXVIII, p. 203-205, December, 1916).

² Anderson, R. M. The Birds of Iowa (Proc. Davenport Academy of Science, Vol. XI).

as this is a remarkably late date for the species outside of its breeding range.

2. *Oidemia deglandi*.—White-winged Scoter.

This bird appears in Iowa only as a straggling migrant and acceptable records of its occurrence in the State should be based on actual specimens.

3. *Branta bernicla glaucogastra*.—Brant.

Anderson (op. cit., p. 189) does not list an existing specimen for the State and only one of the "records" reported related to specimens actually handled. Kumlien and Hollister¹ were able to find only one authentic record for Wisconsin. There is one definite record for Nebraska² and two for Michigan.³ These are the only records based on actual specimens that I am able to find in the State lists for the surrounding region. Upon investigation, all of the other rather numerous reports of the occurrence of the brant have been found to refer to other species. Those most commonly recorded as brant are the dark immature birds of the Snow and Blue Geese. These are often called Brant in the Middle West and the records in the paper under discussion probably are referable to one of these forms. Whatever these birds may have been, the evidence presented by Mr. Fenton seems insufficient as a basis for recording the occurrence of the Brant in Iowa.

4. *Branta nigricans*.—Black Brant.

So far as I am aware, there is not a single authentic record of the species in the Mississippi Valley. It is not mentioned (even in the hypothetical list) in any of the State lists for that region except in Hatch's "Birds of Minnesota" and he gives no dates or specimens. In any case this species and *B. c. glaucogastra* resemble each other very closely and could not be distinguished in the field except by one intimately acquainted with both forms. This record, if valid, would add a species to the Iowa list, but it cannot be accepted in the absence of specimens identified by a competent ornithologist.

5. *Grus canadensis*.—Little Brown Crane.

This species is a migrant through the Western United States, and, so far as is known, appears only as a straggler in Iowa. It closely resembles the more common Sandhill Crane in everything but size, and hence field identifications are not sufficient evidence on which to base an addition to the few records for the State.

6. *Ionornis martinicus*.—Purple Gallinule.

¹ Kumlien, L., and Hollister, N., The Birds of Wisconsin. Bul. Wis Nat. Hist. Soc. 1903, p. 32.

¹ Bruner, Wolcott, and Swenk. A preliminary Review of the Birds of Nebraska, p. 30.

³ Barrows, W. B. Michigan Bird Life, p. 120.

According to Anderson (op. cit, p. 208) this species is a very rare straggler in Iowa and he does not record a single existing specimen. Unless the bird taken by Mr. Waller is still extant to confirm this record it should be excluded from the list. The other bird recorded on sight identification was probably a Florida Gallinule.

7. *Himantopus mexicanus*.—Black-necked Stilt.

This species is a rare straggler into the Northern States and should not be included in Iowa lists on the basis of indefinite statements. Anderson records two specimens for the State.

8. *Tryngites subruficollis*.—Buff-breasted Sandpiper.

A rare migrant in Iowa, of which only a few specimens have been taken. It would be well to have the supposed specimen of the Buff-breasted Sandpiper examined by some working ornithologist before accepting it as an additional record for the State.

9. *Falco mexicanus*.—Prairie Falcon.

Prof. B. H. Bailey, of Coe College, made a special trip to Floyd County to examine the supposed specimen of the Prairie Falcon, and writes me that he found it to be an immature Broad-winged Hawk (*Buteo platypterus*).

10. *Cryptoglaux funerea richardsoni*.—Richardson's Owl.

This species was placed in the hypothetical list by Anderson, as no actual specimens had been taken in the State. On the face of the statements in the present paper this owl would be added to the State list. Dr. Bailey examined the specimen and found it to be a Screech Owl (*Otus asio*) in the gray phase.

The second paper, by F. May Tuttle, contains identifications that it is practically impossible to make in the field.

For example, the Northern Hairy Woodpecker is positively identified on field observation. The status in Northern Iowa of the two subspecies of this woodpecker is still unsettled. In any event the field identification of subspecies, based on *average* differences in size and coloration, should not be attempted.

This last remark applies equally as well to the records of the Yellow-bellied, Trail's, and Alder Flycatchers. The status of the last two in Iowa is still in dispute, but all of my Iowa specimens have been identified by H. C. Oberholser as *E. t. alnorum*. However this question of subspecific range may be settled, the fact remains that field identifications of

these two small flycatchers are not reliable. Personally I know of no working ornithologist who attempts to distinguish between Traill's and Alder Flycatchers in the field.

Similar remarks may be said to apply to the attempt of the average observer to distinguish between Philadelphia and Warbling Vireos in life under normal field conditions.

Another record which needs confirmation is that of the Bohemian Waxwings on so late a date as May 22. The birds were in all probability Cedar Waxwings.